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NOTE

ON

THE SPURIOUS LETTERS

OF

MONTCALM,

1759.

By JUSTIN WINSOR.

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Mr. Winsor drew attention to the latest development respecting the authorship of the pretended letters of Montcalm, in which he had predicted, in 1759, the revolt of the American Colonies in case Canada should be conquered, and the French should cease to exist on their borders to occupy the attention of these English colonists. Mr. Winsor said: —

It will be remembered that the interesting part of these letters was an extract from one purporting to have been written by a French spy in Boston, signed "S. J.," whose views were adopted by Montcalm in writing, Aug. 24, 1759, only a few weeks before his death, to M. Molé in Paris. The earliest trace which I have found of these letters is in December, 1775, when Hutchinson says, in his diary, that they were circulating in London in manuscript, and that he had no doubt they were spurious, inasmuch as the condition of things which "S. J." describes as existing in Boston in 1759 did not exist there, and could not have been chronicled at that time as existing. Two years later these letters were printed by Almon, in London, in what purported to be the French original text, with an English version adjoined. They were quoted in Parliament; and in a famous debate on the American question

instigated by Chatham, and in which Shelburne contended for their fraudulent character, and Mansfield for their authenticity, Chatham, who as it now turns out knew their history, remained silent on that point.

After the war was over and the question of their authenticity was forgotten, some writers who found the book in libraries seemed to have no difficulty in accepting the letters as genuine; and in this category we find such historians as Carlyle in the first edition of his "Frederick the Great," Mahon in the original issue of his "England," Viscount Bury in his "Exodus of the Western Nations," and such writers on Canadian history as Garneau, Warburton, and Mills, as well as Barry in his "Massachusetts."

In 1869 Mr. Parkman reported to this Society,[1] on his examination of the Montcalm papers in France, where he had found a copy of one of the letters in a handwriting which at that time was unknown to him. His conclusion, however, from internal evidence was that they were spurious. In printing the letter to Molé in the Proceedings, Dr. Deane, who was the editor, by collating the several texts reached the conclusion that the original was the English text, and not the pretended French, and inferred from this that the letter could not have been written by Montcalm. The question was taken up the next year (1870) by Henry Stevens in a long note in his "Bibliotheca Historica," in which he came to a similar decision.

About the same time a development was made which for the first time connected the Jesuit Roubaud with the letters. Mr. Henry B. Dawson had found among the papers of William Gowans, the New York bookseller, a paper entitled "Mr. Roubaud's Deplorable Case," and, submitting it to Dr. John G. Shea, that gentleman had prepared a brief introduction on Roubaud, and this and the document were printed in the "Historical Magazine" in November, 1870. Roubaud was

[1] Proceedings, vol. xi. pp. 112–128.

a vagabond priest, who lived by his wits, and had been a Jesuit missionary in Canada, and during his career as such had been the occasion of considerable scandal. After the peace of 1763 he seems to have wormed his way into the confidence of General Murray, then commanding for the English in Quebec, and to have been sent — to accept one of the versions of his career — to England to assist the British ministry in adjusting a demand on the French Government, by which he afterwards claimed to have secured to the British treasury some such sum as a million pounds. At all events, we find him at this period in England, his religion changed, with a Protestant wife, still addicted to scandalous living, and dancing attendance on the ministry, and ready to do any dirty job for them for pay, but mostly without pay, as he afterwards claimed. This "Deplorable Case" is a document which Roubaud submitted to Lord North, recounting his services and setting forth his claims to a suitable consideration. In this he says that at his second audience at Court, after reaching England, he put into his Majesty's hands these letters of Montcalm, and at some subsequent day another copy of the same was given by him to the Queen, for which she paid him twelve guineas; and from this second copy he says that the printed copy was made, "without my consent and against the laws of trust and honor;" and one of his grounds for compensation was that this publication exasperated the Court of Versailles against him, and made it proceed to acts of vengeance upon him. In this paper he says not a word against the genuineness of the letters.

The next discussion of the subject was by Mr. Parkman, in his recent "Montcalm and Wolfe" (vol. ii. pp. 325, 326), where, after depicting the doubtful character of Roubaud, in referring to this "Deplorable Case," he cites the Abbé Verreau as certifying that the copy found among the papers of Montcalm was in the handwriting of Roubaud, and as believing that this adventurer must have been the author of the letters.

If the fellow can be trusted in direct evidence, he was not the author. The Haldimand Papers have been for nearly thirty years in the British Museum, and contain the secret, which has so long lain undiscovered. The Dominion of Canada, having established in 1872 a Department of Archives, has been since then stocking it with copies of papers relating to their history from the great depositories of Europe. Among other things they have had copies made of the Haldimand Papers, as closely touching these annals, that general having been so long in Quebec, and for some years in command. As these copies have reached Ottawa, they have been calendared by Mr. Brymner, the Dominion Archivist, and he has printed this calendar in successive Annual Reports, which to most historical students have been buried by being made a part of the Annual Report of the Commissioner of Agriculture. Mr. Brymner found among these copies, and has given in his last report, a full abstract of a paper similar in tendency to the already known "Deplorable Case," which he calls a "Sketch of Mr. Roubaud's Petition for the Consideration of Parliament" (Haldimand Coll., B. 206, p. 45; Brymner's Report, 1885, p. cxxxviii), in which Roubaud flatly acknowledges the spuriousness of the Montcalm letters, and says they were written by "an Englishman," — confirming Dr. Deane's theory of their being first written in English, — and that their author was intimately known to Chatham, who it will be remembered had silently sat by in the Lords, and heard Shelburne and Mansfield dispute over their authenticity. It is most probable that Roubaud made the French counterpart; and I may add, in conclusion, that Mr. Brymner, in the body of his Report, has sketched with considerable detail the wild and dramatic career of this vagabond Roubaud.

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